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Middle Republican Natural Resources District

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For Immediate Release

Area Producers Attend Water Conference

McCook – Nearly 100 irrigators and producers from Hayes, Hitchcock, Frontier, Red Willow, and Lincoln Counties attended the 20th Annual Southwest Nebraska Water Conference in McCook.

The conference, which took place on Wednesday, March 8, was sponsored by the Red Willow County Extension, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Republican River Water Conservation and Education Coalition and the Middle Republican NRD.

Participants received information throughout the day to assist in making wise decisions for the future of their irrigation operation and for the future of the Republican River Basin.

Local and statewide Irrigation exhibitors set up booths at the conference. Representatives from Tri-City Meter, Great Plains Meters, Southwest Implement, Reinke, Corey Irrigation, Mark Moorhous, Senniger, and the Middle Republican NRD were available throughout the day to answer questions and consult with conference participants.

Presentations focused on integrated management and compact compliance. Middle Republican NRD Manager Dan Smith reported that the average water use for irrigation district-wide in 2005 was 8.78 inches, 30 percent below the 39-inches/3 year allocation. Attorney Dave Cookson from the Nebraska Attorney General's Office praised area irrigators for their effort. Both Smith and Cookson emphasized how important it will be for irrigators to maintain low usage again in 2006.

Smith also encouraged district residents to get in contact with Nebraska senators throughout the state. “Call the ones you know through other organizations, such as the Corn Board or Cattleman’s Association. Let them know what’s going on out here. Only one senator (Tom Baker of Trenton) lives in the Republican River Valley. We need the legislative body to understand that our issues are not only local problems, that they’re not only local irrigators’ problems.”

Smith thanked Nebraska Legislative Candidates for District 44 – Bill Weaver, Mark Christensen, Jeff Tidyman, Kathy Wilmot, Angus Garey, and Frank Shoemaker – for attending the conference.

Surface water irrigators in the district received little good news at the conference about what to expect for the summer irrigation season. Surface Water Irrigation District Managers Roy Patterson (Frenchman-Cambridge) and Don Felker (Frenchman Valley H&RW) reported on surface water flows. Felker said there has been no water in his canals and laterals for the last four years and there won’t be any releases in 2006. Patterson projected only enough water for either the Bartley or the Willow canal. The Cambridge canal will have eight inches of water for irrigators.

Marv Swanda, Office Manager of the McCook field office of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation gave a report on the Southwest Nebraska reservoirs. All the reservoirs show long term declines in inflows.

Bruce Dodson, Land Manager of AgriAffiliates, created the W.A.T.E.R. Model, a spreadsheet tool developed in the spirit of helping agriculturalists adapt to irrigation water allocations by budgeting their water resource and developing strategies that maximize profitability. Users, who enter their data and assumptions to calculate the most profitable utilization of their water resource, can save their individual scenarios for later review and revision. This management tool is available for download at <http://www.agwaterbudget.com>. Dodson stressed that, “the benefit of all these tools comes from making multiple runs and looking at the risk sensitivity of the decisions you are making.”

Raymond Supalla, an agricultural economist at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, presented the Water Optimizer, another tool useful for irrigators in determining profitability with regard to water usage. The water Optimizer was developed in response to several years of drought across the state and to farmers facing water restrictions in the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District and Republican River Basin. This tool evaluates single fields for several crop options. Irrigated crops include: corn, soybeans, sorghum, wheat, alfalfa, edible beans and sunflowers. Dryland crops include: corn, soybeans, sorghum, sunflowers, alfalfa and wheat in continuous, summer fallow and eco-fallow rotations. It is available for download at <http://real.unl.edu/h20/>

Both Dodson and Supalla remarked that there is no magic formula that can be applied across the board to mitigate reduced water allocations; rather, producers must take into account the location of their acres, the crops they produce, and yield goals.

Producers with questions about crop insurance and prevented planting had their questions answered by Gene Foland, a Sr. Risk Management Specialist for the Risk Management Agency, Topeka Regional Office. Foland said that policy holders who are unable to plant all their acres due to water supply restrictions (surface water allocation or well restriction) have two options available to them: prevented planting and non-irrigated practice. Foland assured producers that, “drought or failure of water supply can be an insured cause of loss.”

Ben Hardin, of the McCook Natural Resources and Conservation Services (NRCS) Office, outlined eligibility requirements for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Eligible practices include irrigation pipelines, surge valve systems, drip irrigation systems, center pivot systems, sprinkler drop nozzle packages and water conservation cropping incentives, which include converting irrigated cropland to non-irrigated cropland, pasture or wildlife land. The program offers up to \$100/acre for eligible land that is retired for four years. Payments are made for the first three years.

Brad Edgerton, Division Supervisor for the Department of Natural Resources Cambridge Field Office, discussed the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). CREP seeks to take

100,000 acres of irrigated land in the Platte and Republican Basins out of production and into conservation acres. Nearly 38,000 of the 50,000 designated Republican Basin acres have been contracted for this incentive program. Ken Carriker, Executive Director for the Red Willow County FSA office, outlined the steps involved in signing up acres for the CREP programs. Carriker said, "If you want to sign up, and have questions about whether or not your acres lie with the Quick Response Area, stop in at your county FSA office."

Both Cookson and Smith said that the CREP and EQIP programs, while addressing water uses and water supplies, will have economic impacts on the region. Taking acres out of production directly impacts seed dealers, implement dealers, and the many other agri-businesses that are the mainstays of this area.

The purpose of the Integrated Management Plan adopted by the Middle Republican NRD and the Department of Natural Resources is to sustain a balance between water uses and water supplies so that the economic viability, social and environmental health, safety, and welfare of the Republican River Basin can be achieved and maintained for both the near term and the long term. Finding that balance is going to be one of the challenges of 2006, as the State and Basin NRDs evaluate proposals to supplement the water supply in the basin.

The sound of rain falling on the tin roof of the Fairgrounds Community Building was testament to everyone's hope for the best way to do just that: a rainy wet year.

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